

# ***Des Moines Register***

Guest Editorial  
April 19, 2005

## **Great places in Iowa**

By ANITA WALKER

Imagine a great place. It may be a quiet place along an Iowa lake or stream, surrounded by the natural beauty of a wild prairie and the sounds of native birds. It may be in the heart of a historic downtown, where funky new shops fill old spaces, and the charm of the past drives an authentic new lifestyle. It may be a gleaming urban center or a neighborhood.

Wherever it is, you know you're there. You can feel the energy of a great place, and you can feel its edges. Great places ignore county lines and city limits. They embrace the sense of place, the spirit that emanates from an authentic identity. A great place connects its heart and soul - a lake, arts district, history, culture - with its trails and streetscapes and housing and parks. And it connects with you.

Great places can be pretty or gritty, high arts or street-corner strange. Their power, their greatness, lies in their ability to turn a visit or a residence into an experience.

Gov. Tom Vilsack launched an unprecedented initiative in January: Iowa Great Places. He called on Iowans to be bold, innovative and entrepreneurial, transforming this state into a magnet for people. And he called on our government to become a true partner with the people.

A team of 18 state agencies is launching a new kind of partnership with Iowans. Our goal is to demystify government, combine resources for impact and deliver results.

Great ideas for great places connect the present with the possibilities. But connecting the array of government programs at the right place and the right time can be daunting. Recently, I was approached about a small Arts Council grant to create a music commission that will eventually lead to a festival in a new outdoor amphitheater connected to housing for artists by a new trail system. The Arts Council grant is simple. But there are probably a dozen state agencies with programs and services that could help deliver the rest of the vision. Finding these agencies and programs could exhaust and discourage even the most vigorous Iowan.

But what if you could access all the services you need through a one-stop shop? And what if that shop came to you?

In our new approach, a place - whether a neighborhood, a river road or multi-county corridor - will invite the state to be a partner. In response to the invitation, we will send a team of coaches to listen and learn about your hopes, dreams and vision.

Once the coaches understand the needs to be addressed, a custom Great Place team representing various state agencies will be assigned to work with you to identify relevant programs and resources. We will work together to synchronize and streamline our programs to fit your vision, not to make your vision fit our programs.

Together we will negotiate a partnership that brings together the capacity of government and leverages local resources to turn a Great Place vision into reality. Rather than building a dream piecemeal, we will have the programs and services in place to do the job from start to finish.

The first phase of the initiative will begin this summer with three pilot Great Places. We consider the first year a learning laboratory, where we will test the concepts of our Great Places initiative.

I've just completed a tour of our state, talking about Great Places with Iowans. Among them was a Fort Dodge shopkeeper who left her thriving store in Chicago to take a chance on success in an old Main Street building. She sees Great Place possibilities in the historic brick structures that now stand empty. Her specialty shop is a spark of new life, offering a place to purchase high-end yarns from all over the world. But she's not just selling a product. She's offering an experience. People of all ages are taking classes in how to make trendy scarves and ponchos. Children have birthday parties in a back room. Teenagers stop by to talk and browse after school. She calls her store "Wild Abandonment."

One person asked me if we need to provide Iowans training in creativity. The answer is no. Iowans have plenty of creativity. They just need confidence. And maybe a little wild abandonment.

Let the imagining begin. At home, at work, with family, with friends. What is special about the place where you live? What would make it a great place?

Then come to one of our Great Places Forums to dream a little more. Find out how we can work together to make that dream a reality.

ANITA WALKER is director of the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs. For more information about the Great Places initiative, visit [www.iowagreatplaces.gov](http://www.iowagreatplaces.gov).